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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the history of societal attitudes toward the role of women. The question is raised as to whether the present sexual revolution can enhance either sexual fulfillment or civil liberties for contemporary women. This is discussed in reference to the nuclear family, sexual bargaining, cultural assumptions about women's sexual needs, and legal and economic implications. A number of recommended changes are offered which the author believes will foster women's liberation. Sex education is suggested as an important way to promote a humanistic and experimental concept of sexuality, with emphasis placed upon the need for changing attitudes and behaviors, such as: (1) recognition of the importance of female sexual expression; (2) rejection of the double standard between men and women; and (3) the assumption of equal responsibility on the part of both sexes in a sexual relationship. (BW)

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SEXUALITY, WOMEN'S LIBERATION, AND SEX EDUCATION

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Recently at a dinner party I asked the guests whether they thought free love would do women any good. "Not as much," a psychoanalyst present replied, "as if they got paid for it." His riposte implies the traditional concept of women as merchants. It assumes that women operate in a seller's market and have no need themselves to buy sex. Regarding women's sexuality as a commodity has both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, women have something to sell which men do not, but on the other hand it is the woman who "pays" when she does not make a good bargain. The chief cleavage in outlook between modern feminists and their more traditional sisters centers on sex as stock in trade. The former in decrying the view of women as sex objects would have women withhold their goods from the market, pending a rise in prices or, more accurately, ban such exchanges as illegal and degrading. The latter want to continue capitalizing upon their sex appeal as a source of power.

Because I believe that the woman's liberation movement can be viewed as a bargaining process in which women are struggling to renegotiate their contracts with men on a more equitable basis and that the merchant analogy does illumine certain aspects of the complex relationship between women and men, I would like to quote Kirkpatrick's[1.] elaboration of it:

"The raiding of villages by savages in search of women could be regarded as banditry. Informal negotiations to exchange female relatives represents a barter economy, preceding a more well-established market in which the sex favors of women command a price. Individualized rape in our society could be regarded as shoplifting, and a prostitute as a scab demanding less than the going price, in

terms of security and provision for possible offspring. (This, in contrast to the prostitute's scorn for women who "give it away.")

"Women with acquired defects lessening their sex appeal could be regarded as damaged goods, and nonvirgins as 'secondhand.' The exaggeration of charm by artificial means such as 'falsies' is equivalent to misleading advertising. Immodesty could be considered as unfair competition. The old maid, by analogy, would be an unsuccessful merchant. Coquetry would be equivalent to bargaining, and modesty the counterpart of concealed interest in doing business. An elderly woman might be regarded as shopworn, and the loose woman as a cutter of prices. Frigidity would be equivalent to the reluctant delivery of goods. Women in occupied areas of defeated countries offer distress merchandise to victorious troops.

"With the coming of contraception, sex favors become a less scarce commodity and less associated with risk. The result is that women as merchants begin to offer varied sidelines--as, for example, economic productivity, intellectual stimulation, and homemaking virtues. It is consistent to argue that business is increasingly combined with pleasure. Illegitimacy can be regarded as a bad business practice bringing discredit to the incompetent merchant."

This analogy may strike you as somewhat fantastic, but it does seem implicit in the woman as sex object image so repugnant to feminists. Nor is it entirely false to historical and contemporary reality. In Victorian times large groups of Western women were denied any other view of their sexuality; they were not supposed to have any sexual desires of their own, but to trade sex for love and marriage. Not by accident do we use the term marriage "contract" to define the exchange of "expressive" for "economic" and "instrumental" rewards.

The changing sexual attitudes, beliefs, and behavior in our society which have been termed "the sexual revolution" may be regarded in good part as a recognition of women's sexual needs and sexual rights. The twofold question may be raised, however, of whether this so-called revolution has or can bring to women either a fulfillment of the sexual aspect of their natures or an enhancement of their freedom and rights in other spheres of life. Let us first consider sexual gratification.

In charting changes in sexual behavior it is instructive to note that research has generally taken the nuclear family as the normative focal point of reference--that is, sexual behavior is described as premarital, marital, extramarital, and sometimes, postmarital. Studies of sexual relationships reveal little change over time in the behavior of men, but dramatic change on the part of women. According to Robert R. Bell[2], there have been two turning points in women's sexual ascent: 1. premarital coital rates for women born after 1900 increased from 25 to 50 percent and remained fairly constant until another upswing between 1958 and 1968. This decade also marked a growing acceptance of sex among college women who were not engaged and diminished feelings of guilt. Nevertheless, a double standard still obtains which permits a full sexual relationship to women only when they are engaged or in love--what Reiss has called "permissiveness with affection." Unmarried women may not make open claim to a "sex life." Men, however, are not asked to mouth a rhetoric of love to obtain sex--or, perhaps only to the object of their desire. To the extent, then, that women still must receive love in return for sex to escape social censure and maintain self-respect, they remain merchants of sex.

The inequality of women in sexual bargaining is manifested in

their greater need for commitment and marriage. Recent studies of living together arrangements have shown a much greater interest in getting married on the part of women than of men, as well as a greater reluctance to tell their parents about their relationship.[3.] This feminine concern with stability might be interpreted as evidence of their superior capacity for love or as reflecting their continued social dependence upon a male protector and validator of self-worth.

If women have not attained true sexual freedom, what about sexual rights? Only in the last half-century has the philosophy developed that sexual relations should be as satisfactory for women as they are for men, defined in recent years as experiencing orgasm. This new criterion of sexual fulfilment for the female without fundamental change in the power relationships of the sexes may imply a new submission on the part of women. Even if men as the dominant group have broadened their definition of virility to include pleasing their partner, women may feel constrained to engage in sexual acrobatics or to fake ecstacy in order to satisfy male egos. As I said in my article on "The New Burdens of Masculinity"; "men seek from women the assurance that they are satisfied, and may become hurt and resentful when women play the part of psychological Lysistratas refusing to admit complete gratification." Indeed some feminists attack the insistence on orgasm as part of feminine sexual oppression.

In modern times the cultural assumption has been that women's sexual needs are less urgent or at least of a different order from men's. I say modern times because of the antiquity of the view of woman as temptress. Indeed a manual of witchcraft produced by two fifteenth century German Dominican theologians states: "A woman is more carnal than a man. All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable." This notion has been revived by

recent sex research, and adduced by some theorists as the underlying reason for the social suppression of women.[4] If women are indeed insatiable, then unleashing their sexuality will make them dependent on men, and reverse the situation of trading sexual favors. The plight of old or unattractive women may descend to young or well-favored women who may well find their husbands or lovers locking the bedroom door unless their palms are greased with silver or other non-sexual gratifications are bestowed. In such a situation men may replace women as the merchants of sex, as foreshadowed in some Black relationships in which men feel that their prowess as lovers entitles them to economic support.

The sexual problem for women may well become how to move from a seller's to a buyer's market, how to shift from sex object to sex subject. (It must be remarked parenthetically that the analogy of women as merchants is somewhat deceptive and false. In societies having a dowry system, for example, women are sought not only for their sex favors but also for their fortunes. It is more realistic to regard both men and women as merchants engaged in a bargaining process which takes many and subtle forms.) Today radical feminists counsel celibacy for women on two grounds. They despair of equality in love relationships between men and women in a male-dominated society (Cellestine Ware in her WOMAN POWER quotes an honest male as saying,"If women weren't weaker than men, I'd just as soon sleep with men.") More importantly, they want to free women of entangling male alliances in order to wage group, rather than individual, battles. The "new chastity" should not work any great havoc on women because, as Seaman suggests, women have a more plastic sex drive than men. Since it is easier for them both to suppress and to express their sexuality, they can decide which they wish to do. Of course, if they

get fed up with being eunuchs, they can resort to swinging, lesbianism, and auto-eroticism. Still it might seem that the recognition and free expression of women's sexuality is an important accomplishment which should not be given up lightly. The crux of the question is whether women's gains in sexual freedom will net them economic and legal gains as well. The answer may depend upon whether one subscribes to a materialist or idealist interpretation of history. The relationship between the material and nonmaterial cultures is so complex that it is difficult to ascertain which changes precede, follow, or act concurrently with other changes. Thus, it is usually held that the invention of labor saving devices by freeing women from their domestic chores stimulated the woman's suffrage movement, but it is also plausible that the suffrage movement stimulated the invention of such devices. An excellent statement of the materialist point of view is provided by John Scanzoni.

"The New Left experience demonstrates that women cannot bargain for power and prestige on the basis of sexuality alone. When women try, men simply exploit them in the classic sense of the term--take something (sexual favors) from them, but give nothing substantial (power, status) in return. Men, according to (Robin) Morgan and others, are only too happy to take part in the sexual revolution as long as it does nothing to fundamentally alter male-female roles, which it has not."

Scanzoni advises women to forget about abolishing marriage and the nuclear family and concentrate on gaining direct access to the sources of wealth and power.

On the other side, it can be argued, as do Reich and Marcuse, that sexual freedom is conducive to the kind of aggressive and self-confident personality structure which can add momentum to the woman's

struggle. Wilhelm Reich believes that sex repression is the first and most fundamental repression--political quiescence, fear of irrational authority, mental intimidation are all predicated upon it. Orgastically potent people, he says, will not tolerate authority nor meaningless work, but will instinctually create new forms. It will be remembered that he was an ardent defender of the sexual rights of women. Marcuse, too, inveighs against the "repressive order of procreative sexuality" under the irrational domination of a privileged group, and deplores the general de-eroticization of life. In the contemporary social context, however, he views sexual permissiveness as "repressive desublimation" rather than any joyous fulfillment of the pleasure principle. Perhaps this characterization is applicable to the hysterical hedonism of the flapper era when the bohemian girl so readily became the bourgeois matron.

Both these representatives of the Freudian Left are aware of the dialectical interplay among sexual, family, political, and economic institutions. "Orgastic potency" alone cannot make a revolution, nor can true sexual freedom flourish unsupported by more basic social change. Particularly for women is sexual equality a function of economic equality.

But need women withdraw from sexual circulation in order to advance their demands for fundamental change in the economy: the right to equal work; in the family: role-interchangeability and diversification of family functions; in the educational system: instillation of higher aspirations for women, as well as equal opportunity? It would seem a retrogression to do so, but the answer depends on one's assessment of current social trends.

Nineteenth century feminists felt that women needed to be freed from sex, because they viewed it as leading to earlier marriages and

larger families, and in fact the increased awareness of female sexuality which developed in the 1920's had precisely that result. The baby boom of the 1940's and 1950's was produced, however, not only because of early intercourse and unexpected babies, but more significantly by changes in the climate of opinion, sparked by psychoanalysis which encouraged women to develop both their erotic and material capacities--an orientation which Betty Friedan named "the feminine mystique." Thus, we see that while sexual freedom may create the precondition for other desirable changes in the relations between men and women, its actual effects depend upon interaction with other material and ideological forces.

Developments in recent years have changed the consciousness of women and made unlikely a new retreat into domesticity. They have gained control of their own bodies in access to effective contraception with abortion as a back-up measure. In the poll conducted for Virginia Slims by Lou Harris Associates in 1972 almost half of a national sample of American women favored efforts to strengthen and change women's status in society, and for single women the figure was 67%. Married women's participation in the labor force continues to increase and in 1970 reached 41%. In my college classes there is hardly a young woman who does not plan to follow a profession. There seems to be little indication that women are being trapped by their sexuality, nor require celibacy as the price of independence. Moreover, we have evidence on every side of a new willingness to re-examine traditional ideas about sex roles in the family, in the polity, and in the market place.

I am optimistic enough to reject the guerilla comparison put forward by radical feminists like Dana Densmore who would have women channel their erotic energy into the woman's movement and its

camaraderie and who despair of finding a man who can requite the love of a liberated woman who dares to be herself. Increasing the social and sexual distance between men and women provides no viable solution to the problem. What is required is that women cease to define their self-worth in terms of being attractive to and approved by men. In the recent past only an exceptional woman like Isadora Duncan could find the center of her being in herself--in this case, her art--and thus enter into sexual relationships with men as an independent subject, rather than vulnerable "other." Today vast numbers of women find themselves in the enviable or threatening position of being able to make it on their own. They have no need to hoard sex, lest it be squandered or extorted. Their bargaining position begins to approximate that of men. Both sexes may choose to flatter or charm to win the object of their affections. Rejection need not be more devastating for women than it is for men. Women can embrace freedom and accept the responsibility of becoming a mature, self-motivating individual.

However, considering the past history of sexual relationships, it may be necessary for women to form a cartel to prevent other woman from trading on the old unequal basis. By banding together women can undermine the double standard and force men to accept a permissive single standard for both sexes. Women as the sex which has historically been more skilled in managing emotionally-charged relationships and using the language of romantic love can help men in working out new rules for conducting business in a more straightforward and honest manner. In the bargaining process they can help in promoting concern for fair bargaining, giving full value, and a judicious generosity which, by the process of the benign, rather than vicious cycle, will yield a rich return to both sexes.

In training future negotiators sex educators can play an important part, although sex education alone cannot solve the total problem of fashioning a society which fosters mutually fulfilling relationships between the sexes. It can, however, promote a humanistic and experimental concept of sexuality, defined as basically good and devoid of any notions of defilement, though subject to the kinds of ego controls which people exercise in all their life activities. The over-all objective of such a program, utilizing such varied techniques as media presentations, discussion, and role-playing, would be to enhance the communicative aspects of person-centered rather than body-centered sexual experiences. More specific goals might involve the following attitudes and behaviors:

1. Recognition that expression of sexuality is at least as important for the female as for the male.

2. Explicit rejection of the double standard and any invidious distinction between "good" and "bad" women. No equation of masculinity with sexual conquest and feminine virtue with chastity.

3. Discouragement of the use of sexual attractiveness or sexual activity for non-sexual purposes.

4. Acceptance of feeling that sexual, or even social, rebuff should be no more damaging to feminine than to masculine egos.

5. Assumption of equal responsibility on the part of both sexes for entering into a sexual relationship and dealing with any problems it may entail for either partner.

6. Development of skills in expressing one's own feelings and responding to those of one's partner.

7. Acceptance of needs for both dependency and autonomy in both sexes.

8. Belief that sexual attractiveness and pleasing the opposite sex are equally desirable in both sexes, but should not be the sole basis for validating feelings of identity and self-worth.

9. Understanding of the relationship between the sexual script of a society and other aspects of gender roles in its dominant institutions, especially the economic and family systems.

FOOTNOTES

1. Clifford Kirkpatrick. THE FAMILY AS PROCESS AND INSTITUTION, Second Edition, New York, 1963. The Ronald Press Company, pp. 165-166. Kirkpatrick credits Henry C. Beers with the invention of this concept in an article entitled, "Women and the Marriage Market," HARPER's MAGAZINE (1927), 694-703, but an earlier expression is found in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's WOMEN AND ECONOMICS, 1898.

2. Robert R. Bell. PERMARITAL SEX IN A CHANGING SOCIETY. Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1966. Prentice-Hall, Inc. pp. 57-59.

3. Personal communication from Dr. Betty Yorburg on findings of studies as yet unpublished conducted by herself and colleagues.

4. See Mary Jane Sherfey. "The Evolution and Nature of Female Sexuality in Relation to Psychoanalytic Theory, JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHO-ANALYTIC ASSOCIATION 14 (1), January, 1966, 28-128.

   Also Ingjald Nissen in his "The Role of The Sexual Constellation," ACTA SOCIOLOGICA, Vol. 14, No. 1-2, 1971, holds responsible the sexual mismatching of men and women over the life cycle--that is, men had to manage sexual life to compensate for their sexual weakness in the last half of life, and in order to do this, they also had to strive for all other powers--social, political, economic, etc.

5. John Scanzoni. SEXUAL BARGAINING: POWER POLITICS IN THE AMERICAN MARRIAGE. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1972. Prentice-Hall, Inc. pp. 122-123.